**SAYING GRACE**
**November 23, 2008**

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**Psalm 100**
**Luke 6:1–5, 38**
**Deuteronomy 14:22–26**

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord. . . .
Enter his gates with thanksgiving"
Psalm 100:1,4 (NRSV)

Praise is the duty and delight,
the ultimate vocation of the human community. . . .
All of life is aimed toward God and finally exists
for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies
our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves
in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are.
Praise is not only a human requirement and human need,
it is also a human delight. We have a resilient hunger
to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth
to the One from whom it has been granted.
In our return to that One,
we find our deepest joy.

Walter Brueggemann
*Israel's Praise*

*In this season of Thanksgiving, dear God, our hearts are full of gratitude.*
*So we come here this morning to say thank you for life itself*
*and for every blessing. Now, in this time together,*
*silence in us any voice but your own, speak the word you have for us,*
*and give us faith to hear it and courage to live it.*
*Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

More and more I hear people say that Thanksgiving is their favorite holiday. There aren't the demands on personal time, attention, energy, not to mention checkbooks, that come along with Christmas. There are a few Thanksgiving cards around, and it is very nice to receive them, but the greeting card people have not yet persuaded us that we need to send several hundred to all our friends and relatives, business associates,

customers and clients. And, of course, there are no Thanksgiving gifts to select, purchase, and deliver. William Sloane Coffin said once that he could really “get into” Thanksgiving, the only victimless national holiday—“if you can overlook several million turkeys” (*Collected Sermons*, p. 39). (That was difficult to do this year with Governor Palin on camera as one of those turkeys met its demise.)

I love Thanksgiving because it always feels like the beginning of Advent and Christmas, which actually happens in church next Sunday but in fact began officially last evening, in this neighborhood, with the Michigan Avenue Lighting Festival and its parade, complete with floats and including a full complement of Disney characters, led by Mickey and Minnie Mouse (who, by the way, turned eighty recently) and, of course, Santa Claus himself. All the lights on the trees on the Avenue come on, and there is a huge fireworks display. Our choirs and anyone else who wants to sing along stand on the front steps of the church, singing carols. People seem to like it: they stop and smile, a small crowd gathers, some actually join us for a while. I confess it always feels to me a little like John the Baptist crying in the wilderness—singing “What Child Is This” a few minutes before huge floats with Mickey and Minnie Mouse on top pass by. It is great fun, particularly when our house staff people, who have been working all day to assemble and install our electric sheep grazing outside the Garth, in a display of high-tech synchronization flip the switch and the lights that adorn the sheep come on at just the moment all the trees are illuminated. It’s actually quite impressive.

So is the story of Thanksgiving itself: “simple, stirring,” Bill Coffin called it. The Pilgirms arrived in 1620, sailed into Plymouth Harbor after exploring several alternative sites, built a settlement, cleared some land. The New England winter was more harsh than anything they had ever experienced. They survived on the meager rations they had brought along. Half of them fell ill and died. Every family experienced the loss of a child, a parent, a grandparent. In the spring they planted crops with the help of natives who showed them how to fertilize. By harvest time, they knew they could survive at least another winter on the corn, squash, beans, peas, and barley to brew beer, which they drank in impressive quantities.

Their leader, Governor William Bradford, declared a “time to rejoice together after a more special manner,” sent four men “fowling” to bring ducks and geese from Plymouth Harbor. In addition to poultry and vegetables, there were shellfish, cod, and striped bass. Contrary to the favorite Victorian paintings of the event, they did not sit at a long table covered with a white linen tablecloth, praying as the natives stood around watching. They stood, throwing pieces of meat into stew pots that simmered on spits over open fires. They ate with their fingers and knives; forks didn’t appear for another seventy years.

There probably was no turkey. The New England wild turkey was lean and fast and difficult to shoot. What they had an abundance of was venison. One hundred natives showed up with five freshly killed deer.

In his fascinating book, *Mayflower*, Nathaniel Philbrick writes,

> The first Thanksgiving marked the conclusion of a remarkable year. Eleven months earlier the Pilgrims had arrived at the tip of Cape Cod, fearful and uninformed. They had spent the next month alienating and angering every Native American they happened to come across. By all rights none of the Pilgrims should have emerged from the first winter alive.

Philbrick says it happened because of their faith and resolve and their decision to take advantage of the extraordinary offer of some natives to help them. Significantly, their faith, which could be narrow, exclusive, and regard native people as inferior—to be either converted or killed—in this case caused them to see natives as allies. Some even went so far as to regard them as brothers and sisters, not enemies. Philbrick is convinced that made the difference.

So when the harvest was in, they took a day off from their labors to eat and celebrate together and to give thanks to God.

Eating together to celebrate and praise God is as old as the Bible itself. It is no euphemism to say that you can read the Bible every day all your life and still discover new passages and new insights. For me last week it was the fourteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, the heart of the law—not a part of the Bible to which we are ordinarily drawn. The writer is discussing the sabbath and dietary rules and the tithe, a unique Hebrew concept of setting aside a tenth of all the crops and flocks for God. And then the passage takes a fascinating turn: “You shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine and oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flocks so that you may learn to fear the Lord.”

Apparently there is going to be a party, a big party with lots to eat and drink. Everybody is going to be there to eat together. Furthermore, if you live too far away to haul all that grain and livestock to the party—that 10 percent of everything, the tithe—sell it, take the money and purchase food when you get there. It is a remarkable little gem: “Spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together” (Deuteronomy 14:26; see W. S. Coffin, *Collected Sermons*, “Thanksgiving”).

In the Bible, when something important needs to be said and done and observed, when some rejoicing needs to be done, people eat together. In the Bible, God is present when bread is broken and a cup shared.

In a book that will forever change the way you think about food, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan explores the origins of our food and the processes by which it ends up on our dinner plates. He advocates food grown locally and organically. The culmination of the book is a "perfect" meal that meets all his criteria and which he prepares himself: picks beans and greens from his garden, bakes bread from special organically grown wheat, cultivates the yeast, hunts for mushrooms, buys and learns how to shoot a gun and kills a wild pig.

The meal is all that he hopes for and more, shared by his wife and son and closest friends. There is not much religion in the book, but there is this about the meal:

> I had actually wanted to say something more, to express a wider appreciation for the meal we were about to eat, but I was afraid that to offer words of thanks for the pig and the mushrooms and the forests and the garden would come off sounding corny. . . . The words I was reaching for, of course, were the words of grace. . . . I realized that in this particular case words of grace were unnecessary, because that's what the meal itself had become, for me certainly , a wordless way of saying grace." (p. 407)

That's a little of what was going in the fall of 1621, and it is, I suspect, what many of us will experience this week as we sit down to eat with our dearest ones. It's a little of the grace and abundance Jesus talked about when he said, "Ask and it will be given unto you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be placed in your lap." There is an abundance in creation, enough for everyone. And in and through the abundance of creation is the goodness and love of God.

It is the essence of religion to acknowledge it, name it, celebrate it, and to give God thanks. The Psalms, ancient Israel's hymn book, say,

> Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
> Worship the Lord with gladness;
> come into his presence with singing. . . .
> Enter his gates with thanksgiving. . . .
> For the Lord is good;
> his steadfast love endures forever.

That's Psalm 100. The hymn based on the Hundredth Psalm, "Old Hundredth," is the oldest English hymn still sung. It's a hymn with

Presbyterian credentials. The tune, which is the tune of the Doxology with which we begin our worship every Sunday, was written in 1551 by Louis Bourgeois, John Calvin's organist and musician at St. Peter's Cathedral in Geneva. The words are a Scottish paraphrase written by William Kethe, a friend of John Knox, in 1561.

The Pilgrims surely sang it as they ate and drank together at the first Thanksgiving, and we will sing it together this morning.

To acknowledge that all of life is a gift and to thank the giver is the heart of religion and the heart of what it means to be fully human.

Walter Brueggemann writes,

> Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community. . . . We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy." (*Israel's Praise*)

And Karl Barth:

> What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise of this gift and giver?"

And C. S. Lewis, noticing that grateful people are happy people,
> Praise is inner health made audible." (*Reflections on the Psalms*)

And John Updike:

> Ancient religion and science agree: we are here to give praise . . . to pay attention.

To praise God for the givenness of life, to thank God that all is grace—corporately in worship or in private prayer or at table with loved ones—is to be called out of yourself for a moment or two, to be called away from the relentless focus on me, mine, my needs, my feelings, and to focus on something greater. It is a countercultural subversive act in a market economy and culture that tells us over and over that our needs are what really matter, that meeting our needs, whatever they are, will make us happy, that "this Bud's for you." True worship calls us away from narcissism, away from self, and into the presence of God. It is, in the words of the great hymn, to be "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

And as Updike said, it is to pay attention. That's not always easy to do with our fast-paced life, crowded calendars. "The Acceleration of Almost Everything" someone called it in a book of that title a few years ago. The

quintessential twenty-first century urban adult strides purposefully down the sidewalk, iPod plugged in, eyes straight ahead, focused only on the goal of getting there, tuned out to the sounds of life. Pay attention, religion insists. Look and see and listen to the majesty and mystery that is life. “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8).

That’s what poets do—pay attention. It’s how Wendell Berry spends his Sunday mornings, walking in the woods, looking and listening, paying attention. Then he comes home and writes a Sabbath poem:

> I go among the trees and sit still
> All my stirrings become quiet
> My tasks lie in their places
> where I left them, asleep like cattle . . .
>
> After days of labor,
> mute in my consternation
> I hear my song at last
> and I sing it
>
> (*A Timbered Choir*, p. 5)

Wrote Edna St.Vincent Millay:

> O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
> Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
> Thy mists, that roll and rise!
> Thy woods, this autumn day. . .
> . . . I do fear
> Thou’st made the world too beautiful this year.

Religion pays attention and says grace, regardless of what is going on.

The hymn writer Martin Rinkart, in the seventeenth century, in the middle of a dark time of religious war and suffering and death, wrote

> Now thank we all our God . . .
> who wondrous things hath done . . .;
> who from our mother’s arms,
> hath blessed us on our way
> with countless gifts of love,
> and still is ours today.

It is the heart of religion to acknowledge the grace of it all, to say grace, to thank the giver of the gift. Someone said recently that the best reason he

could think of for believing in God is that if you don't, you don't have anyone to thank.

Donna Schaper, pastor of Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan, writes, "Sometimes I think that joy is simply grace realized. Grace is the undeserved gift of life. Joy is when we know it."

Donna, who was a pastor in Miami before moving to New York City, tells about an elderly parishioner whose doctor had told her that she had little time left to live. The parishioner made an appointment with Donna, who assumed the woman wanted to talk about her funeral and to discuss an adult child who was having a lot of trouble. Donna was surprised when she said what she really wanted to tell her was "about the painted buntings—small, colorful birds that migrate to Florida every fall." Characteristically the woman began with an apology: "I don't know whether I should tell you because you are so busy, and you have to sit still for a long time, in the right place, to see the buntings."

Donna and the woman's physician both urged her to attend to her own needs, her own agenda, with the time she had left. The woman telephoned a few days later and announced, "The buntings have returned." Donna says she knew that "when she told me about the birds and her delight . . . she was letting me know who she is. And she was experiencing the joy of grace realized" (*Living Well While Doing Good*, pp. 98–99).

> We are his; we are God's;
> we are God's people,
> the sheep of his pasture
>
> Give thanks to him; bless his name,
> For the Lord is good;
> God's steadfast love endures forever.

That is the ultimate grace. We belong to God. Jack Stotts, seminary president, scholar, pastor, member of this congregation, died last year. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) asked him to chair a committee to write a Brief Statement of Reformed Faith, and he did so magnificently. The opening line is "In life and in death we belong to God." God is the source of our life, from whom we come and to whom we return: the ultimate grace—we belong to God forever.

And so whatever your particular circumstance this morning—worried about your health, your job, your savings account, your retirement, your relationships . . . Whatever your circumstance—having received a great joy, the birth of a child, an expression of love, a successful surgery, a surprising

grace or having suffered a great loss, the death of a dear one, a parent, a spouse, a friend, a beloved colleague . . .

You belong to God.
So do give thanks.
Say grace.
The Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.